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ABSTRACT

Companies should think about women because women represent half the human resources available to them. Actually, the most productive response companies can make to women's presence in the workplace is the full assimilation of women into all areas and at all levels of corporate operations. Achieving full assimilation will require time, however. Presently, barriers to constructive change exist. These include women's unfamiliarity with the corporate environment, their need for career guidance and role models, and the high turnover rate among their group. Other barriers are traditional male perceptions of sex roles, the male-oriented corporate culture, need for maternity leave and other leave associated with parenting, the virtual absence of quality child care, and the problem of relocation. Companies can develop, and some in fact have implemented, methods for identifying employee and environmental problems actually or potentially impeding productivity. Methods now in use by corporations include a task force approach to identifying critical work and family issues, "surfacing" groups for identifying potential productivity problems within a specific employee population, and an environmental scanning process for monitoring new trends and developments in the world and within the corporation. Regardless of what other steps are taken, success in resolving productivity problems requires an effective communication policy and evaluation procedures. (RH)

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WHY SHOULD COMPANIES THINK ABOUT WOMEN?

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WHY SHOULD COMPANIES THINK ABOUT WOMEN?

Women have moved in vast numbers from the home into the work force, making an irreversible occupational change from housewife/mother to salaried worker. Today, the numbers of women in the work force almost equal those of men, and it is the norm for young women to prepare themselves for careers. Women now represent 52% of undergraduates, 15% of engineering students, 33% of MBA candidates, and almost 50% of law school students. It is estimated that two out of every three entrants into the work force for the balance of this decade will be women.

The answer to the question "Why should companies think about women?" does not come as a result of humanistic interests or even in response to legislative pressure, but because women represent half of the human resources available to companies today. Companies can either waste this resource--or use it to their best advantage.

Beyond the abundant talent of the baby boom generation there will be a leadership shortage. It is in the self-interest of companies to think about women because women represent a vital and critical resource of leadership talent that can fill this gap. If women are ignored, distracted by anxiety, and kept at lower levels, they will be a costly burden to the employer. If the barriers to their productivity and advancement are removed, however, they will be able to make a valuable contribution that will increase the company's productivity and, thereby, its profitability.

While the full assimilation of women into all areas and at all levels of the corporation is the most productive response to women's presence in the workplace, traditional values, attitudes, and behavior concerning work and family need time to change. We are in the midst of transition from a past when roles were defined by gender to a future when roles will be defined by the preference of the individual. But current perceptions about appropriate roles and behavior for women and men lag behind today's social and economic realities.

The composition of the work force has been altered radically in recent times, as has the composition of the family. The traditional family comprised of a working male with a wife and young children at home--the family for which corporate policies were designed--now accounts for less than 25% of the population. The two-income family is now the rule rather than the exception, as inflation has made a second paycheck mandatory for most families. Over half of all children under 18 have a working mother, and 48% of all married women with children under six are in the labor force. The single-parent family is today's fastest growing family type: One out of six of all families is headed by a woman, and the number of women maintaining families on their own has more than doubled over the past 20 years.

The formerly male-dominated workplace is now densely populated by women who were socialized to be supportive and nurturing--qualities essential to caring for children, yet antithetical to the corporate culture. The problem is compounded by the reality that most women still have primary responsibility for home and family. The double burden of two jobs impedes their productivity and prevents them from moving into leadership positions--positions which must be filled today by the best talent available in the country, be it male or female.

Males, on the other hand, have been socialized to be dominant and aggressive. Even when their wives work, many men continue to feel responsible for the financial support of the family and thus, often competitive with women. They find home and

child care responsibilities unfamiliar and threatening to their sense of themselves as males and to their employers' image of them as committed managers. Men have been raised to expect a support system at home, characterized by a clean house with dinner on the table, happy children, and their wives' total support of their careers. They are afraid of relinquishing this structure, of undertaking shared home and child rearing responsibilities, and of giving equal weight to their wives' careers when considering relocations for fear of jeopardizing their own career growth. Yet today, many young men are experiencing conflicts: raised by absentee fathers, they want to participate in raising their children; they want, and often need, the second income that their wives provide; and they are just beginning to sense the freedom they will have from the inexorable pressure of being the sole provider.

This new freedom requires vast reeducation of men, women, and their employers so that attitudes and behaviors can change and new, constructive policies can be formulated.

IDENTIFYING THE BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Both individual and institutional barriers work against constructive change. These barriers operate both in and out of the corporate environment and impede the productivity of women and men. They include:

1. Women's lack of familiarity with the corporate environment. Many women are not acclimated to the corporate culture. They lack access to the "old boy network," and miss the important contacts that come with it. They often find communication with men difficult, and are not entirely comfortable having men report to them. Much of their unease results from their traditional socialization--which has not prepared them for success in the corporation, but for the care of home and the rearing of children. Women are taught to avoid taking risks, to be task- rather than goal-oriented, and to be supportive rather than aggressive. Traditional roles are perpetuated as women's self-perception is reinforced by men's perception of them. While men encourage risk-taking in other males, they insist that women first prove themselves worthy of responsibility, thereby intensifying women's aversion to risk.

One company, Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company, is addressing these issues through a series of three-day workshops for men and women at all levels in the company. Designed to sensitize men to the barriers women face, the workshops also help women learn how men succeed and provide a basis for easier, on-going communication between men and women.

2. Women's need for career guidance and role models. Women in general have not planned from an early age for their careers. They need more guidance than men, more information on career paths in the company, and role models. Some women directors are encouraged by their chairmen to meet with women in the company; other role models might be mobilized within the company for women at lower levels.

3. Turnover of women. Most women still follow their husbands, but, as the discrepancies in salary between husbands and wives narrow and disappear, families will be able to make decisions on the basis of the lifestyle and career priorities of both. The discrepancy in pay is not so much a function of discrimination as of where women work. Today women are preparing themselves for technical and scientific jobs, and more of them must be encouraged to pursue line rather than staff positions.

The problem of turnover also results from the realization on the part of the new generation of career-oriented women that they must search for the corporate environment that can accept female excellence and offers the freedom and support necessary for accelerated career development. For some of these women, career development requires changing jobs to get the breadth of experience they need to advance.

4. Traditional male perceptions of sex roles. Traditional perceptions of "appropriate behavior" often penalize women--and therefore their companies--for exhibiting "masculine" (managerial) behavior. The male manager who is interviewing for an opening in sales welcomes aggressiveness in males but might reject a woman with the same characteristics because he views it as unbecoming in females.

Men need to become aware of their own stereotypical perceptions of women and to understand women's behavior in the context of the roles for which women were traditionally socialized.

5. The corporate culture. The corporation is still an institution designed by men for men, which often results in a work environment that is alien or inimical to women. Today, this environment is probably perpetuated less by prejudice than by ignorance of what it is that excludes or demeans women or causes them anxiety and stress. This lack of awareness, however, is costly to the company, for such an environment drains energy and stifles creativity. Women would be much more productive in a supportive climate where recognition and positive treatment can increase communication and cooperation. Some women will endure a negative climate. The best and the brightest, however--those with leadership potential, ability, and drive--will find alternatives. They will start their own companies or find employment with companies or corporations with enlightened attitudes and policies.

6. Maternity leave. Women's ability to bear children is probably the only functionally unique aspect of their presence in the work force. Insofar as pregnancy is viewed as a physical disability, it is finite and can be handled as a short-term disability. Only eight states, however, require companies to have disability insurance and only 40% of women are covered as a result of residing in those states or of being employed by corporations that are headquartered there. The average company provides six to eight weeks disability leave.

Beyond physical disability there is a period of adjustment which is part emotional (the transition from motherhood back to the work world), part logistical (there are added family responsibilities), and part physical. Companies would benefit from a better understanding of this transition period. The productivity of a woman who returns to work prematurely can be severely impaired. Flexibility is the key: an extra period of leave or of part-time employment might enable a woman to continue working productively and prevent her from quitting (at great cost to the company) in desperation. Catalyst has found that of the women with demanding jobs and husbands who only "help" rather than share, some will eventually quit rather than speak up about the need for flexibility and change, while others will continue with their careers but at the expense of their physical and emotional health and their productivity.

7. Parental leave. There are many parents who feel that one of them (it is still much more likely to be the mother) should be home with the child for the first year or even until the child goes off to school. This requires a parent to take a longer term leave, ranging from one to five years. Equity dictates that this period is best handled as personal leave that is available to both women and men.

In the corporation, these leaves are perceived quite rightly as problems. There are, however, many ways in which the problems can be mitigated:

* Companies can use the time that a parent is on leave to develop its human resources. Time Inc., for example, uses the temporarily vacant position to try out potential new employees or to give current employees the opportunity to work in another department or to learn a new function.

* Women and men can share parental leave as they are free to do at AT&T, thereby minimizing the length of time that either has to take off.
* A period of part-time employment can be arranged so that families can adjust to new responsibilities. Here too, allowing men as well as women a period of part-time employment can minimize the length of time that either will have to take.
* The parent, when it is feasible, can work at home. For example, Continental Illinois Bank will in some cases install terminals in homes of new mothers so they can continue their work and remain accessible to their child.
* By helping to make high quality child care readily available, companies can minimize the need for long leaves of absence.

8. The virtual absence of quality child care. The lack of affordable, high quality child care costs companies in absenteeism and stress that result from inadequate or precarious child care arrangements that require balancing many separate parts and diverts the attention of the parent at work. The result: an increase in anxiety that impedes their productivity. All too often, companies think of child care strictly in terms of on-site centers, an alternative that is inappropriate in many cases. But there are many specific options from which a company can choose in responding to the child care needs of its employees--many of which are relatively inexpensive--ranging from noontime seminars such as those provided at Philadelphia Savings Fund Society, or an information and referral such as New England Life Insurance Company provides.

9. The problem of relocation. Relocation, because of its immediacy, its effects on men as well as on women, and employees' increasing resistance has been at the forefront of corporate attention. Many two-career couples are resisting relocation for economic reasons, which include the career needs of the spouse as well as the costs of the move. Companies are experimenting with a variety of responses: Merck and Company in conjunction with Home Buyer's Assistance Corporation, for example, developed a job bank for relocating employees and offers career counseling for relocating spouses.

WHAT CAN COMPANIES DO TO ENABLE WOMEN--AND MEN--TO FUNCTION AT THEIR FULL POTENTIAL?

Companies need to develop methods to identify problems that impede productivity. Such mechanisms can help identify issues and trends that are just emerging, as well as those that may pose an immediate problem. This type of approach enables a company to get an early fix on issues and interpret their significance at a developing stage so that policy can be formulated before issues become problems. These are some of the methods used successfully by a number of companies:

Task Force Method

Two companies that have used a task force approach to identify critical work and family issues are Northwestern National Bank and Honeywell, Inc. One of the special task forces that Northwestern convened studied research trends in family structures and lifestyles, with an emphasis on the relationship of these trends to the workplace. The task force determined the bank's objectives with respect to work and family issues and developed recommendations for policy and practice revisions. Honeywell's Working Parents Task Force was specifically convened to develop solutions to the problems of working parents and the impact on productivity; the task force developed a number of recommendations for corporate action in three areas: employment practices, parent education, and child care.

Surfacing Groups

The Catalyst Career and Family Center is conducting a series of "surfacing" focus groups at major corporations, designed to identify potential productivity problems within a specific employee population.

At a recent focus group, participants identified the existence of a widely held perception that the company cultural norm discouraged employees from bringing up personal or family problems at work. One key issue that surfaced in this focus group was that, in the long run, such a perception would have a negative impact on productivity. Unacknowledged or neglected personal or family problems may fester, causing emotional strain that can result in lowered productivity. The strain is exacerbated when employees feel forced to make false excuses or hide their problems. When problems reach a crisis point, the attendant stress and illnesses can also cost the company in terms of medical expenses.

One solution suggested in this focus group is the adoption of an "official" corporate philosophy or statement that recognizes the personal or family aspects of employees' lives. In and of itself, corporate recognition of work and family conflicts can relax tensions and promote an atmosphere that allows for discussion and constructive change. The next step need not be massive or costly, but could be as simple as instituting work and family seminars at lunch to provide a forum for information exchange among parents.

Environmental Scanning Activity

Merck & Company has been effectively using an environmental scanning process for a number of years. The environmental scanning process is a means of monitoring new trends and developments in the world (the external environment) and at Merck (the internal environment). The objective is to look at the same kinds of topics from these two different perspectives and use this information to predict needs and develop programs and policy. For example, national demographic trends such as delayed childbearing and the increase in the number of working mothers, which are reflected internally at Merck, can be monitored in the company's employee opinion surveys. The employee opinion survey is just one tool used in combination with others in the internal scanning process to help identify emerging issues, trends, and factors so that Merck can do a better job of managing its human resources and meeting its strategic objectives.

These are just three methods by which companies can begin to analyze existing personnel policies and practices in the context of their present work force to determine their effectiveness.

To create policies that are responsive to the realities of today's workplace, managers need to develop new analytical tools; they will need to learn to be as comfortable analyzing social trends and qualitative data as they are with analyzing quantitative data. This step will require education--and time.

By incorporating issues such as parental leaves and women's career development into the planning process, however, companies can begin to define objectives that will insure that these issues are given adequate and fair attention and are not relegated to a peripheral place on the corporate agenda.

Once the company has identified the problems that impede productivity, it can decide on which problems it is prepared to address and develop a plan of action. The company yardstick should be return on investment: What is your cost? How many of your employees at each level are affected? What dollar or equivalent value does it have for them? Corporate priorities should be based on the degree to which the cost of addressing a particular problem and finding the solution is less than the cost in productivity of the problem. In moving ahead, a company would want to insure that policy makers are well informed about the issues and appreciate the value of adopting an attitude of flexibility in what is offered and how it is offered.

DEVELOP A GOOD COMMUNICATION POLICY

The effective resolution of productivity problems requires an equally effective communication program on two levels. Communications between top management and middle managers and supervisors must be clear and open in order to insure full commitment and make certain that policies adopted at the top are effectively and efficiently carried out through the various organizational levels.

Employees also need to be fully informed on corporate policy as it relates to women's career development and work and family matters. Neither employee nor manager should have to second-guess the company when it comes to asking for or granting a parental leave, for instance. Employees also need to know that overall management philosophy encourages them to take advantage of any existing family support programs, rather than fearing that they will be considered less career-committed, or somehow professionally "stigmatized" in the eyes of management for appearing to be "overly" preoccupied by family-related matters.

EVALUATION IS CRITICAL

Insofar as the primary and legitimate concern of business is to generate profits it is critically important that changes in attitudes, behaviors, and policies are consonant with this goal. The outcome of change must be evaluated. The creation of an evaluation instrument should be part of the process of planning and implementation. The specific objective of change are to:

1) enhance management talent and leadership;
2) remove artificial limitations on the productivity and creativity of women (and men);
3) insure the well-being of children and, thereby, of future employees.

* * *

Changing traditional patterns of behavior is never quick or easy. During unfavorable economic periods, business is understandably reluctant to channel funds--and attention--to functions that are not seen as having a direct and positive impact upon the corporate ledger. To the extent, however, that institutional and individual barriers and family conflicts are affecting and will continue to affect the productivity, loyalty, and morale of a growing number of women--and men--at all organizational levels, the presence or absence of corporate policies will have a direct impact on the long-term fiscal viability of any business enterprise. The company that gets an early fix on the issues and treats the underlying causes rather than just the superficial symptoms, will be best equipped to respond proactively--rather than reactively--with policies that support the dual goals of developing highly talented people and increasing productivity. Companies cannot afford to wait for precedents before they act; they must set precedents by taking action.

For more information on the issues and responses presented in this report, contact Susan Lund, Director, Catalyst Career and Family Center, 14 East 60th St., New York, New York 10022.